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Q & A WITH BOB LAIRD

An Insider's View of UC Admissions

■ Berkeley's director of admissions has won praise for fairness and compassion. But as he prepares to retire, he worries about the state's failure to create more opportunities, especially for minorities.

By KENNETH R. WEISS
TIMES EDUCATION WRITER

A groan ripped through the audience of high school counselors. Bob Laird, the man who decides if their students make the cut for UC Berkeley, had just announced his plans to retire.

A few high school counselors stood and began to applaud. A dozen more rose to their feet. Soon the entire auditorium joined in a long, noisy tribute to Berkeley's admissions director.

What was going on here? Hadn't this guy crushed the dreams of thousands of their high school seniors who wanted to go to Berkeley?

The answers came when Laird was mobbed after his speech. "You don't have a right to leave us," one tearful middle-aged counselor said, smothering him in a hug.

Tributes poured from the mouths of the "college counselors," those high school advisors who work tirelessly to find spots at the best colleges and universities for their most promising high school seniors.

They talked about Laird's integrity, his compassion and fairness. They talked about experiences they shared with Laird over the last two decades as he sought to bring the very best students of all races to Berkeley and, in particular, integrate the campus with more African American, Latino and Native American students.

"Whether you agree with his views or not, you have to admire his passion," said one college counselor.

Ivna Gusman, a counselor at Chatsworth High, describes Laird this way: "He's the conscience of the UC system."

Laird, 60, said he will step down Nov. 15 because of the "wearing" pressures of his job. He plans to work on a novel, do some writing about admissions and spend more time with his wife, Karen Rice, and two sons, Sam, 14, and Casey, 10.

Laird has spent 22 years at Berkeley as a student recruiter and admissions officer. For the last six years, he has been director of admissions, overseeing the office during a particularly tumultuous time.

The UC Board of Regents in 1995 banned admissions officers from considering race, ethnicity and gender in selecting students—a decision reaffirmed by the voters a year later with Proposition 209's ban on affirmative action.

When new policies were implemented in 1997, admissions of black students plunged by 60% and Latino students by 53%, although they have rebounded somewhat since then.

Earlier this year, Berkeley was slapped with a class-action lawsuit filed by every major civil rights groups in California on behalf of minority students who were denied admission. Their claim is that the new system is unfair to minorities.

Meanwhile, the competition for freshman slots at Berkeley has soared. In 1993, when Laird became director, 19,800 students applied to become freshmen. Applications rose to 31,100 for this fall's class, although the number of seats available to freshmen has remained the same.

Question: What does it take to get into Berkeley these days?

Answer: With 31,000 applications and 8,450 admission slots, the competition is really severe. The mean GPA for this fall's freshmen was 4.15 and the mean SAT was 1,307. But about a quarter of the students we admit have GPAs below 4.0. We read every application twice and find students who have done remarkable things, but not hit that 4.0 mark on GPA. We look for kids who have done the best with what's available to them. Berkeley admitted 27% of its applicants for this fall, and that makes us the most selective public university in the United States. And in some ways that's not a good thing.

Q: Most universities love to brag about how desirable they are, their rising caliber of students and how many students they turned away. Why don't you do the same?

A: For a public university to turn down almost three-quarters of its applicants, it's not a good thing. Almost all of our applicants are California residents and most of them have parents who have paid taxes that support the university. Denying that many students admission creates a whole series of problems in terms of public relations and maintaining broad-based university support.

Q: Why not just double the number of freshmen you take at Berkeley, and at UCLA, for that matter, the other campus where competition is going through the roof?

A: It's certainly clear that Berkeley is not going to increase in size, because of a legally binding agreement with the city. I don't see any easy resolution to this problem. In fact, I think the problem is likely to become worse. The tendency for large numbers of students and parents to focus on what they see as the top 10 or 12 universities across the country is huge.

Q: What schools are you talking about?

A: It's mostly the upper Ivies and Berkeley and Stanford and possibly a small number of private liberal arts colleges that aren't in the Ivy League, and possibly UCLA. With the increase of high school graduates in California and the state's failure to plan over the last 15 years for a steady expansion of higher education, the pressures are going to increase on places like Berkeley and UCLA.

Q: We know all about the surging competition at Berkeley and UCLA. There must be some way . . .

A: The only probable long-range solution to this "tunnel thinking" is to change people's perceptions. Students in California have a remarkable set of opportunities in public higher education. All of the campuses in the UC and many of those at the [California State University] are also quite strong. But most of us in admissions and outreach have been saying this for 10 years or more with little apparent effect.

Q: Why is that?

A: The perception is so deeply rooted—that if you don't graduate from one of those top schools, it's going to be hard to have a meaningful and worthwhile life. That's not true, of course. But it's a very difficult thing to get across to 17-year-olds, and even harder to get across to their parents. I think a lot of people are motivated by fear about the future, a fear that there will be only a limited number of opportunities in a Darwinian world.

Q: Speaking of limited opportunities, do you lament the loss of affirmative action as a way to admit more African American and Latino students?

A: I do. It was an unfortunate decision by a relatively small number of voters. There wasn't nearly enough public conversation about what it means that the entire public K-12 system in California is 51% African American, Latino and Native American and the flagship public university has only 14% of these kinds of students. My own view is that, used responsibly, affirmative action is an appropriate and necessary tool.

Q: The public perception was that the use of affirmative action went too far.

A: In my view, affirmative action was used responsibly. We included middle-income students in affirmative action, but clearly the strongest preferences were to low-income students. It is important to the university that not all African American students at Berkeley be poor, that there be a range of African American experiences and points of view reflected in the classroom and the student body.

Q: The other perception was that a lot of white and Asian American students lost out to affirmative action.

A: The numbers of white and Asian American students who were denied admission to Berkeley because of affirmative action were really quite small. We were still going to turn down 18,000 or 19,000 students no matter what. There was a mistaken assumption that with Proposition 209 taking effect, a white or Asian American applicant would have a much better chance of getting into Berkeley. That's turned out not to be true.

In my view, the state-ended affirmative action before we ended the social and economic conditions that have created the need for it. We are trying to pretend that school reform and outreach somehow can solve this dilemma.

Q: Pretend?

A: I don't think we are very honest in our public conversations about the causes of the low [college] participation rates of African American and Latino students and what's really at the root of the problems in the K-12 schools. We are not honest about the incredible inequities in California society—26% of children in California live below the poverty level, which is an income of $16,500 a year for a family of four. And the gap is widening. So huge numbers of kids are behind by the time they get to kindergarten and fall further behind in the first few years of school—often not because of the problems in the schools. To think that this is K-12's fault and that we can fix this, particularly by outreach to K-12, is naive and dishonest.

Q: But can't outreach help?

A: It can help, and I think it's important to do it. But it's one small part. The long-term solution is to create a much more equitable and a much fairer society.

ROBERT DURELL / Los Angeles Times

Bob Laird, UC Berkeley's admissions director, walks up the steps at Sproul Hall on campus. He will retire in November after 22 years at the school.

Q: That's a pretty tall order for higher education. What can colleges and universities really do?

A: Higher education can insist on a more honest conversation instead of responding to political pressures in the most expedient way possible, which includes a kind of happy talk about the future. We're not acknowledging how complex and deep-rooted the problems are.

Q: The ACLU recently sued the Inglewood school district, claiming that black and Latino students are denied equal access to places like Berkeley because they don't have access to Advanced Placement courses. What do you make of the suit?

A: It raises the important question of how to define equal educational opportunity, with the extraordinary differences we have in public high schools. One question is whether the lawsuit focused too narrowly on Advanced Placement courses when, in fact, it should have focused on honors courses in general. AP courses are only one type of honors courses, at least for UC's path to award 5 grade points for an A. But honors courses carry the same extra grade point as AP courses. They can also earn that same grade point by taking transferable community college courses. Also, I'm not sure that it's fair to blame the schools in Inglewood.

Q: So who is to blame?

A: It's important to reexamine the notion that K-12 has failed. A lot of it started with Proposition 13. We defunded a lot of K-12 and created a situation where affluent areas could take care of their public school needs, but there wasn't the support needed in disadvantaged areas. If you look at Palos Verdes Peninsula High School and go a few miles east and look at Locke High School, you would think you are in two different countries, instead of six or seven miles apart.

Q: So this lawsuit misses the mark?

A: One of the issues that seems to be missing is the effects of tracking within an individual high school. We know that minority students get tracked away from honors courses. In some ways, it may be more important who is allowed into those courses within the school, rather than how many courses a school offers.

Q: Civil rights groups are also suing Berkeley, claiming your admission practices are unfair to minorities. What about that?

A: I'm worried that it will discourage some African American and Latino students from choosing Berkeley. It is also personally difficult to be sued by groups that have the same values I have. It's also ironic for Berkeley to be sued by these groups because most people across the country would point out that Berkeley has been one of the moral leaders in the struggle to integrate elite public and private institutions of higher education.

CF: Treatment Now Possible

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"This exciting research represents an entirely new strategy to correct and possibly even prevent some of the ravages of this disease," said Robert J. Beall, president and CEO of the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation.

Although DHA is present in fish oils and nutritional supplements, the researchers warned strongly against patients taking such supplements on their own because other components could be harmful.

"If we were to leave patients with any message, it is 'Don't do it,'" Beall said. Cystic fibrosis victims who take high doses of the supplements "could do themselves irreparable harm" because of impurities in the commercial products, he added. "Give us the time to do clinical trials properly."

Genzyme General of Cambridge, Mass., is now developing a suitable form of DHA for human testing that would eliminate such problems and is working as fast as possible to make it available, said Dr. David Mercer, Genzyme's vice president for medical affairs. DHA is isolated from cold-water fish.

Cystic fibrosis, commonly called CF, is a genetic disease affecting about 30,000 children and adults in the United States, making it the most common fatal genetic disorder. About 1,000 new cases are diagnosed each year, most in early childhood.

CF causes cells lining the lungs and the pancreas to secrete an abnormally thick, sticky mucus. In the pancreas, the mucus blocks bile ducts used in secreting enzymes that help the body digest food. The mucus also clogs the lungs, impairing breathing and leading to a high incidence of life-threatening infections. About half of CF patients die before the age of 32.

The gene that causes CF was identified 10 years ago, and that discovery has led to many new approaches to treatment. Several gene therapy trials are now underway, for example, but none so far shows signs of great effectiveness.

At least 11 new treatments for CF are now in clinical trials. But if the new results reported in mice can be replicated in humans, DHA promises to be the most effective of all.

One particular advantage is that DHA would be taken orally to treat the whole body, while many of the other new treatments are directed only at the lungs or the pancreas, said Mary Lou McDowell, co-chairwoman of the National Cystic Fibrosis Awareness Committee.

Dr. Juan Alvarez and Dr. Steven Freedman of Beth Israel, a Harvard University teaching hospital, are specialists in studying the metabolism of fatty acids, the long molecules from which cellular membranes are constructed. Although other scientists have examined fatty acids in the bloodstream and found nothing unusual, Alvarez and Freedman decided to look at the tissues most affected by CF—the lungs, the pancreas and the intestine.

Using mice with the same genetic defect as humans, they found that those tissues had an unusually high level of a fatty acid called eicosatrienoic acid, or EA, and unusually low levels of DHA. DHA, in particular, plays a key role in the functioning of cellular membranes, regulating the passage of materials into and out of the cell. Because the two fatty acids are linked in the cell, low levels of DHA lead to high levels of AA.

To see if this fatty acid imbalance was related to the disease, they fed a group of CF mice high levels of DHA for a week. After seven days, the AA:DHA ratio in the tissues had returned to normal and many of the symptoms were brought under control, Freedman said.

Bile ducts in the pancreas, for example, were no longer clogged or blocked. The intestines absorbed food better. And the lungs were no more susceptible to pneumonia than those of healthy mice. The researchers observed no side effects from the treatment, he added, and healthy mice given large doses of DHA showed no changes.

Working with researchers from the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, Alvarez and Freedman then studied biopsy tissues from the nose and colon of six humans with CF and six healthy controls. They found the same fatty acid imbalance in the human patients, but not in the controls.

"This lipid abnormality is truly a feature of CF," Freedman said. That finding strongly suggests that the results in mice can be translated into humans.

DHA is a constituent of fish oil that is sold commercially as an aid for cholesterol control, as well as of some other food supplements. But Freedman cautioned against patients taking such products in high doses.

"Not only can we make animals much better with pure DHA, but we can also make them much sicker by giving them other fatty acids," such as those found in the commercial products, he said. And excessive amounts of AA, the primary constituent of fish oil, not only blocks the activity of DHA, but can suppress the growth of children who consume large quantities, he noted. The drug being developed by Genzyme would be pure DHA.

Information for patients, including a summary of the presentation and a Q&A, can be found at the foundation's Web site, http://www.cff.org.

OBITUARIES

Howard C. Raether; Funeral Industry Spokesman

By ELAINE WOO
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Howard C. Raether, a leading spokesman for the American funeral industry and authority on bereavement rituals, who vigorously defended the undertaking trade against stinging criticism in the wake of journalist Jessica Mitford's muckraking investigation in 1963, has died.

Raether was 83 and died Wednesday at a Milwaukee hospital, according to a statement by the National Funeral Directors Assn.

Raether was executive director of the association, the world's oldest and largest funeral trade organization, from 1948 to 1983. After his retirement, Raether was a consultant to the 90-member-based group, which represents 14,000 funeral directors nationwide.

He helped set industry standards for dealing with death and bereavement and wrote or edited several books dealing with nearly every aspect of the modern funeral.

Raether "may be the father of modern funeral service," said Robert Harden, the current director of the National Funeral Directors Assn.

He also led the funeral industry through some of its most difficult times.

He and his group figured prominently in Mitford's best-selling expose, "The American Way of Death," which subjected the funeral industry to withering scrutiny. Among the aspects of the funeral trade it dissected were sales strategies, claims about the necessity of embalming, and practices of the cemetery industry. Buckled in a hilariously titled chapter, "God's Little Million-Dollar Acre").

Raether debated Mitford on television and radio shows, never backing down from his firm belief in the importance of a traditional funeral, with its often expensive trappings.

"We never had a session where we agreed," Raether recalled in an interview last year.

But he did credit Mitford with sparking "a greater interest in dying, death and bereavement than ever before."

Mitford, who died in 1996, was not an charitable. In her book, she depicted Raether as an effective spokesman for a powerful and exploitative industry. She often attempted to skewer him with his own words, such as in an excerpt of a speech Raether gave to a funeral directors convention in which he criticized the trend toward offering cheaper, pre-arranged funerals. "If funeral directors insist on soliciting pre-need funerals," Raether was quoted as saying, "they are in fact prearranging the funeral of their profession."

In another section, Mitford undermined his claim that a famous medical clinic supported his contention that unembalmed bodies posed a public health hazard. Mitford contacted the clinic, which told her that "Mr. Raether has been misinformed" about the clinic's policy. Mitford viewed embalming as an unnecessary service that undertakers foisted on grieving families to make money.

Her book provoked hearings in the 1970s by the Federal Trade Commission, which was proposing federal regulations to eliminate alleged abuses in the funeral industry.

Raether helped lead the charge against the proposed rules, contending that they would lead to delays in moving bodies to mortuaries and create a mountain of paperwork for consumers of funeral services.

"Regulation of funeral practices would create more problems than it would solve," he wrote in a newspaper commentary in 1976. "It would replace a personal decision-making process and a meaningful ceremony with a commercial transaction whose aim is merely to dispose of a dead body."

The hearings eventually led to a set of federal regulations that came to be known as "The Funeral Rule." Adopted in 1984, the regulations required funeral directors to offer a price list of goods and services and prohibited them from charging for casket-handling and performing unauthorized embalming.

Raether, born in Milwaukee in 1916, became interested in the funeral business as a young lawyer when he handled a case for the Wisconsin Funeral Directors and Embalmers Assn. He worked for the state trade group for five years before moving to the national association in 1948.

In retirement, he remained active as an industry leader, writing a widely used protocol called "The Funeral Directors Practice Management Handbook." He also was frequently quoted as an expert, commenting on funeral trends such as the increasing participation of teenagers in burial services.

He also promoted the introduction of courses on death, dying and bereavement in elementary and high schools and colleges.

Raether is survived by his wife, Sylvia, a daughter, a sister and two grandsons.

■ **Claude Bessy; Punk Rock Writer**

Claude Bessy, 34, a colorful and influential figure in Los Angeles' late 1970s punk rock world. A native of France, Bessy moved to Los Angeles in 1973 and created a reggae fan magazine. In 1977 he co-founded Slash magazine with a group of fellow artists in the Venice area, and the monthly publication became the unofficial organ of the city's thriving punk rock scene. Writing under the name Kickboy Face, Bessy unleashed torrents of irreverent musical and social criticism that reflected the anarchic spirit of the times and championed such unconventional but influential acts as X and the Germs. In 1978 the magazine released a record by the Germs called "Lexicon Devil," launching a record label that in later years would sign such bands as Los Lobos and Fishbone. Bessy moved to England in 1980, where he worked as a writer, disc jockey and music video producer and served as a consultant to such acts as the Fall, Nick Cave and Sonic Youth. In 1987 he moved to Barcelona, where he died Oct. 2 of lung cancer.

■ **Charles A. Federer Jr.; Astronomer, Magazine Editor**

Charles A. Federer Jr., 90, a self-taught astronomer who founded and edited Sky and Telescope magazine, Federer taught himself the study of stars and planets as a child growing up in Redding. He earned a physics degree from the City College of New York in the 1930s and founded his magazine in 1941 by combining two money-losing journals, the Sky and the Telescope. His magazine for amateur astronomers, which he edited for 33 years, now has a circulation of about 125,000. On Sept. 26 in Mystic, Conn.

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